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SUBJECT: Cocalero Marching Season Begins

REF: A) Lima 942

B) Lima 906

C) 04 Lima 1381

D) 04 Lima 947

1. (SBU) SUMMARY: The annual cocalero marching season has begun with two road-blocking demonstrations in Upper Huallaga Valley areas infamous for their militancy. Leaders launched the protests with false stories of local illnesses from spraying of coca fields with chemicals. Police easily freed road blockages and brought both areas under control. Cocalero hopes that the strike would spread to other cocalero hotbeds such as the Monzon have fizzled for the moment.

2. (SBU) Cocaleros say they plan more strikes and a March national cocalero congress in Lima. While more cocalero protests are inevitable, the Upper Huallaga strikes gave an encouraging sign in that non-coca economic actors and local leaders retreated from the cocalero bandwagon when cocalero spraying claims proved spurious. The GOP was slow to react but eventually weighed in forcefully. Mission efforts to halt the effects of disinformation are paying off, and the Mission will build on opportunities to show how cocalero aims and actions are hurting their communities. END SUMMARY.

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Background to the Marching Season  
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3. (U) As the rains ease in the coca areas east of the Andes at the end of February, cocaleros in recent years have mobilized to protest GOP eradication of illicit coca. Their classic technique of blocking road commerce to force GOP concessions is more effective since the end of rainy season means licit commercial enterprises are now able to use the roads. Eradication pressure on cocaleros in this area continues (Ref A); Puerta Pizana, hometown of strike leader Nancy Obregon was the site some days ago of a GOP eradication/interdiction operation that destroyed 26 maceration pits.

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False Reports of Aerial Spraying  
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4. (SBU) False rumors that the GOP or USG were conducting aerial spraying of illicit coca fields have resurfaced periodically for years. Early this year, cocaleros in the Tocache area of the Upper Huallaga Valley (southern San Martin and northern Huanuco Departments) claimed that adults and children were intoxicated by what they called fumigacion (spraying) from aircraft. Protesting cocaleros displayed posters announcing No To Insecticides. (Note: typical of the general ignorance and misinformation circulating among uneducated communities whose main source of information is word of mouth and radio, many residents appeared to believe the non sequitur that the GOP/USG would be using insecticides to kill plants.) The mayor of Tocache, Pedro Bogarin said he had proof of spraying; his proof was a 2002 videotape of a package falling from a helicopter.

5. (U) In addition to local examinations, several adults went to major university laboratories for toxicology tests. While quick to print spraying allegations, newspapers eventually reported that the tests were negative. The Minister of Health confirmed to NAS Director that she had been personally involved in overseeing the tests of two alleged victims and that there was no evidence of chemical intoxication. She left open the possibility that there had been some sort of chemical poisoning, perhaps from water contamination due to runoff from the toxic chemicals that are used to process dried coca leaf into cocaine base.

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The Strike - Tocache  
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6. (U) Tocache is in the Upper Huallaga Valley and for several years has had extensive illicit coca cultivation.

Local cocalero leader Obregon announced an indefinite strike on 2/15 to protest alleged aerial spraying of coca fields, other crops and the local population. Press and NAS estimated 1500 to 2000 protesters. Nearby Uchiza and Shunte cocaleros participated by blocking surrounding roads. Tocache mayor Bogarin initially supported the strike and cocalero demands that the central government deal with spraying allegations, low prices for alternative crops and the poor roads hampering crop transport. Peruvian National Police (PNP) troops were reinforced to around 150 with additions from Lima and Tarapoto; they dislodged the road blockers with no serious injuries reported.

17. (U) On 2/23 Mayor Bogarin, after press reports indicated no evidence of spraying, expressed disillusion that the main strike justification had proven false. He charged that the strike was serving the narrow interests of narcotraffickers and cocaleros, did not respect the non-cocaleros who had to make a living. Cocalero leaders from the three areas met without Obregon on 2/25 and announced they would lift their strike despite her calls to continue it indefinitely. Bogarin then claimed on 2/28 that there was still some toxic chemical use that the government should investigate. He further criticized the GOP and USG for discrediting the cocaleros, saying they were neither narcotraffickers nor responsible for Tocache's problems. The Uchiza mayor has continued to talk of commissions to investigate environmental (read spraying) problems in his area.

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The Strike - Tingo Maria  
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18. (U) Tingo Maria (northern Huanuco) cocalero leader Elsa Malpartida called a two-day strike starting 2/23 in support of the Tocache spraying claims. Three of the four area roads were blocked, the fourth left open to allow commerce. There were no violent confrontations and the strike fizzled despite calls among some cocaleros to extend the strike indefinitely. Most commercial activity went on as normal during the strike.

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Who Did not Strike - Everyone Else  
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19. (U) In Aguaytia (Ucayali), public offices and many businesses were closed because of fears that cocaleros would attack those that stayed open; a few roads were blocked but commercial activity continued. In the Monzon narcotrafficking stronghold, none of the 59 cocalero communities participated in protests. Cocaleros in the Ene and Apurimac Valleys (VRAE) did not mount significant protests. Malpartida's announcement that protests would stretch through the central jungle to Puno in the south did not pan out.

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But ... the Pot Continues to Simmer  
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110. (SBU) Despite the continuing lack of evidence that chemical intoxication had resulted from spraying, cocalero leader Obregon continued to claim that the protests she directed were as a result of threats to the environment (from presumed spraying) and not about coca. Malpartida announced several commissions to study cocalero problems in Pucallpa. VRAE cocaleros claim to be preparing a document showing that the USG is conspiring with the GOP to spray coca fields. Leading dailies reported on 2/27 that Congressman Luis Guerrero (Peru Posible, Cajamarca) called for a congressional commission to investigate spraying claims. The Ambassador met with Guerrero and other Cajamarca congressmen for lunch on March 1 and assured him the USG does not conduct aerial eradication in Peru. Guerrero stressed that he proposed Congressional hearings only to clear the air about the spraying allegations. He offered the Ambassador the opportunity to appear at the hearings or to provide a written statement.

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GOP Response  
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11. (SBU) Unlike with some cocalero protests last year, GOP representatives did not negotiate familiar cocalero demands that coca cultivation for these communities be legalized or that ENACO (the GOP parastatal that purchases licit coca) buy more of their coca. The GOP was less effective in aggressively combating the disinformation about aerial spraying that cocaleros were able to spread uncontested until the second day of the strikes. By 2/24 dailies reported remarks by various commentators and GOP leaders, including the Minister of Agriculture that spraying claims were spurious. The GOP still has lacked in some common sense approaches to communications. First Lady Eliane Karp, at a Washington conference, made remarks about coca that

were fairly innocuous; however, they were taken out of context and interpreted in the press as an endorsement of coca. She reportedly said that coca had various virtues and that the demand for coca meant it could not be completely eradicated. The following day she clarified her remarks.

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Mission Response  
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12. (SBU) The Mission has contracted with a team of communication experts, including ex-Minister of Interior Fernando Rospigliosi, to advise the GOP on effective communication techniques. At the team's suggestion, journalists who had previously written articles critical of GOP counter-drug actions, visited the cocalero strike sites, interviewed the cocalero leaders and ending up writing more balanced accounts of the strikes.

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Our Next Steps  
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13. (SBU) Many public officials and journalists exhibited a disturbing tendency to start from the premise that spraying allegations should be investigated rather than recognizing at the outset that there had never been any evidence of spraying. The statements of the Public Ombudsman (charged with protecting citizens' rights) focused more on possible health problems from spraying than on the indisputable health problems many more citizens suffer because of narcotrafficking.

14. (SBU) We will meet with the Public Ombudsman to set the story straight. While a number of national leaders spoke out constructively, the Mission will urge others to do so (such as the Interior Minister whose lack of a public stance was noticed). Building on our continuing education of the press will remain important.

15. (U) The GOP is also considering law enforcement options against cocaleros. Prime Minister Ferrero showed a videotape on 2/27 to the Peruvian press in which Obregon admitted that the vast majority of coca is destined for maceration pits (i.e., narcotrafficking). The State Prosecutor for Drug Offenses, Sonia Medina, announced that she would evaluate the video to determine if it constitutes sufficient evidence to bring drug offense charges against Obregon. Obregon has countered that she will bring defamation charges against the PM.  
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